Traffic Congestion in Washington

PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Washington state, people spend more than 100 million hours each year stuck in traffic. Traffic congestion is a chronic problem facing every metropolitan area, one that imposes an enormous impact on our lives and our economy.

In order to consider ways of easing congestion, we must first understand its causes. Washington, like other states, is enjoying a population boom. More people are commuting to work, and using a region's roadways. Second, people are driving more. There are more women driving, more single-occupant vehicles, and more suburban-based trips. Third, roads are not being built as fast as traffic is growing. Fourth, because road space is perceived as 'free', vehicle owners don't have strong incentives to change their driving habits on congested roads.

How extensive is traffic congestion? Figures for the Seattle/Bellevue area show a fourfold increase in a twelve-year period from 1983 to 1994[1] But it is important to note that the problem is localized to certain segments of the road network at specific times of the day. Only 6% of the road network and 20% of the freeway network in the Seattle/Bellevue/Tacoma area actually experiences congestion during the afternoon rush hour.[2]

Policy makers have not reached any general agreement for what level of traffic congestion is appropriate to an area. Having congestion does prove that investments such as roads and bridges are being used, and that the region is economically vibrant.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Some congestion solutions are proposed below. Most of these approaches have been tried in Washington or other states, and in other countries.

- **Build more roads:** The number of lane miles of roadway is not increasing as fast as traffic growth. Adding more general purpose lanes would attempt to match demand for roadways with supply.
- **Add more HOV or HOT lanes:** Puget Sound has a partially completed network of High-Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes which allow buses and carpools with two or more occupants to travel in specially designated lanes. High-Occupancy/Toll (HOT) lanes, would convert

[1] Bureau of Transportation Statistics

[2] Texas Transportation Institute

existing HOV lanes to allow solo drivers the right to use the lanes for a fee, and could be used to pay for new HOV lanes.

- **Expand transit**: Adding bus or rail transit provides an alternative to driving on congested highways.
- **Employ intelligent transportation systems**: Intelligent transportation systems (ITS) include ramp metering, signal timing, and traffic information systems. Also included are quick response teams that clear away accidents or vehicle breakdowns from roadways.
- **Use road pricing:** The theory is to use prices to allocate road space on roadways prone to congestion. By charging tolls based upon time of day, level of congestion, or length of trip, the market would regulate how many drivers are on the road at a given time.
- **Cash out employer-paid parking:** Employee parking is perceived as 'free' by many who work in large office parks or manufacturing plants. Federal tax codes treat it as such. However, all parking comes at a cost. Employers must either buy the lot, or pay to rent it. This cost, besides being a tax incentive for employers, actually rewards those who contribute to traffic congestion.
- **Use transportation demand management policies:** Transportation demand management (or TDM) are fine-tuning approaches to existing systems. Compressed work weeks, telecommuting, ride-sharing, flextime, and staggered hours are some TDM approaches.

EVALUATION

Proposed solutions to the issue of congestion will be evaluated against the following criteria:

- fixes the most critical problems first
- is cost effective
- produces measurable change
- is acceptable to the public
- is administratively feasible
- maintains or enhances safety